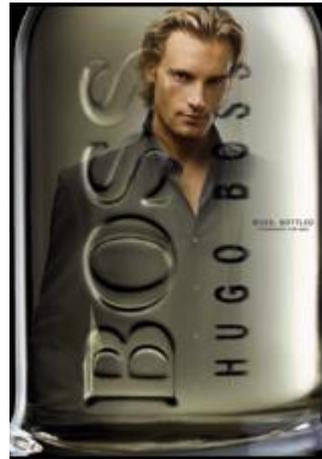


Your fragrance, everyone's rules
Massive transgression and collective individualism in Hugo Boss advertisements

by Marco Benoît Carbone

As a student in semiotics, the contribution one can provide to Ocula magazine in trying to deal with the role of advertisements in the mass communication semiosphere takes the shape of both considerations based upon a personal perception of the medial environment, and self-questioning. My personal opinion is that advertising in the contemporary age – intended as the mere horizon of my personal glance – plays an important part in a vicious circle of axiological contradictions and deformations, which migrate both easily and noxiously. Or, to say the least, I believe that pseudo-individualistic, successful ad campaigns such as the Hugo Boss samples I am to examine find themselves favourable in such a semiotic habitat as the mass-medial society we live in. The contradiction between the mass-attractiveness of some of the messages and the pretended value in freedom they propose becomes, in some cases, particularly striking, and apparently unacceptable for any mind that actually cogitates. In the social game, individualism is reinforced as a formal and exasperated value, systematically highlighted yet later to find a crude refutation: in the messages themselves and in their more profound textual outcomes. Yet, it would appear, such a contradiction is not universally perceivable. In the contemporary mass media context one can speak of such narrations as a sort of standardized will for individualism, of ideally sought transgression of the mass status: in truth, it looks like this will only produces fake, nominal illusions of transgression, acted as a part of the very mass. Thus, such postulates of freedom only act on a superficial level, actually confirming adherence to a *status quo* which, in my contemporary society, I perceive as an ethological goal which pushes the massive yet individualistic pawing to a collective, imitative target of pretended excellence and actual mediocrity. As is clear, I don't intend to elevate simple, personal considerations like these to the status of a useful grid or a structural analysis. I am just going to analyze two Hugo Boss perfumes ads in which, I believe, one can notice this formal cult of personality and the individual as it emerges in one of its narrations; as a penetrating cult that hovers and pervades the dominant cultural and anthropological models even when it becomes serial in its core. Moreover, I think the most important aim to me in writing this article is reflecting on the role of semiotics as a discipline of social criticism and critical analysis of meaning, in one era in which it seems the discipline is mostly applied

to provisional and synthetic capabilities, to consultancy in business contexts, and to a sort of scientific will for applicability. I attended a discussion about such a theme very recently, in Bologna, during a presentation held both to introduce Ocula magazine's previous issue about space and to provide and preview the subject for the present issue about advertising.

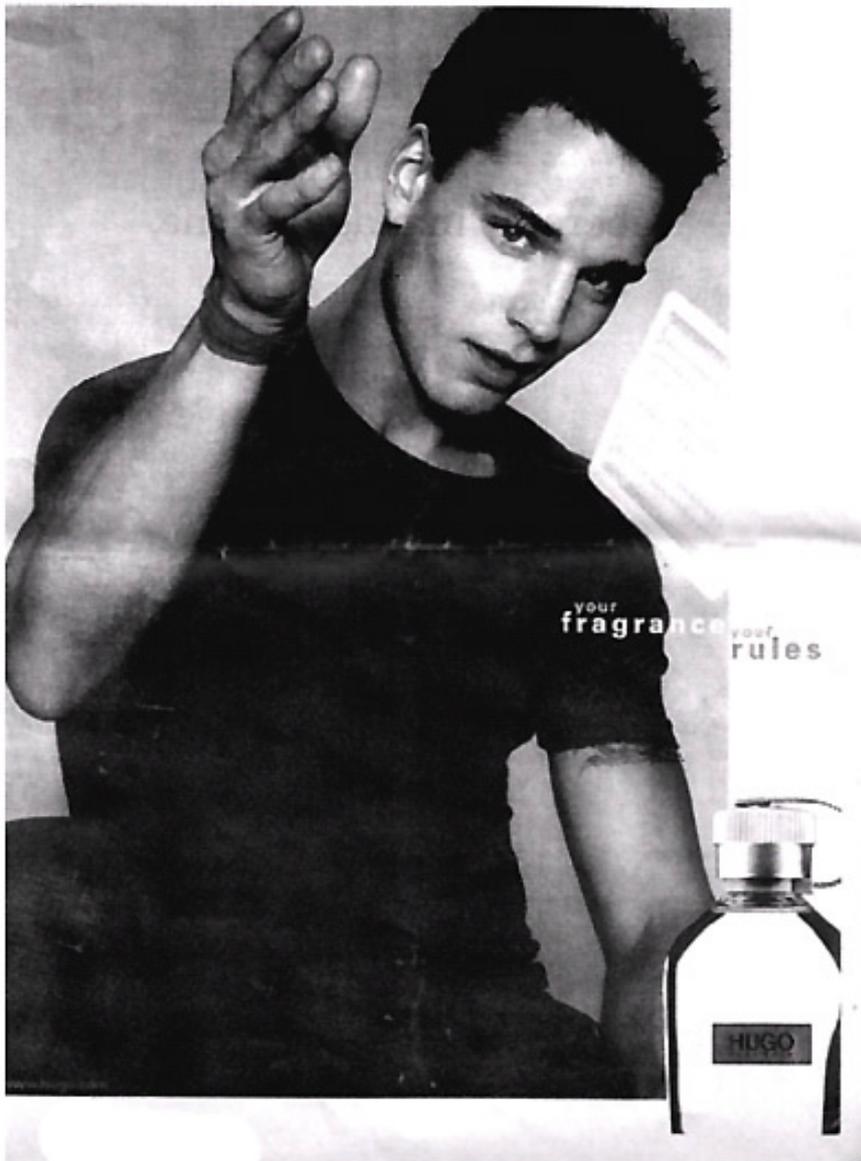


Essences in the semio-sphere

Inasmuch as one can consider as self-evident the multi-medial conducting of the kind of *enunciation process* advertisements arise from - especially for brands such as those in the field of fashion - one can presumably believe that, by broadening the texts under analysis with a wider socio-semiotic perspective (thus considering the whole campaign), it should be possible for the interpretative hypothesis made on the texts to gain further confirmation. Perfume ads, moreover, the kind of advertising the texts in exam fall into, are highly codified enunciations which sell more behaviour modelling than the essences themselves. If I may make a metaphor from the side of *semiotics of passion*, I would say that the superficial behavioural schemes they narrate highlight some dynamics of *connotation* and *mythicizing* of personality in a way that a forced rhinencephalic penetration does. These dynamics, however, are in no way limited to magazines ads, as they are widely at work in the whole field of advertising and in any form of communication.

Magazines, nonetheless, no matter intended for a general public or a specific target, for men or women, to fashion or society, are the ideal habitat for a certain kind of advertising language, to which they give further reinforcement from their own side, both economic and symbolic. A broader, theoretically valid view for these thoughts of mine would come by considering how the enunciation process at Hugo Boss used the more or less codified, industrially practised languages of magazines. Subsequently, the same kind of analysis should be moving on to each of the advertising sectors that the practises and consumes of society and the industry cut off, frame and standardize, on which they work and practise. I think, however, I can avoid exaggeration by claiming that the formal exasperation of individualism is a phenomenon that anybody can immediately test by putting his nose out of his window (and, in some cases, keeping it at home), and especially in similar campaigns. Following these precise statements, my personal considerations will concentrate on two Hugo Boss perfume magazine ads, both published in magazines in 2004 and initially examined by me during a course in textual semiotics. The most interesting one pictures the perfume's bottle presented with a male model in a bragging pose, as he throws a playing card out of the frame and, in doing so, haughtily determining "his own rules". In the second ad, one watches the model as if he was emanating from the bottle, as if he showed the inner identity of that consumer who seems to have successfully entered the state of *embrayage* with the Boss essence, reaching both his perfume and his real attitude.

1. Social rules, nominal transgressions

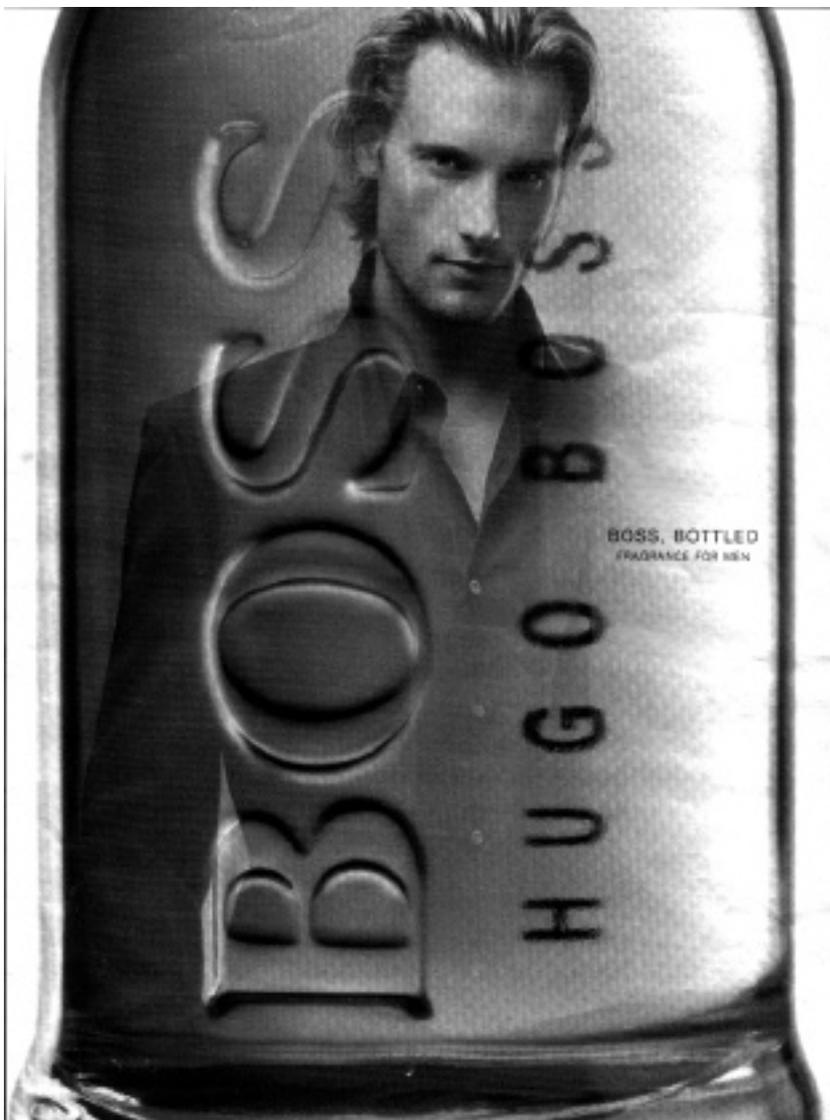


In the first ad, “Your Fragrance, your rules”, the overall message refers to a mythicizing imagery of largely male-oriented matrix, which one could paraphrase as follows: “by choosing Hugo Boss, you choose to let your true nature free, establishing yourself as one active subject, unconstrained by adherence to any rule” (presumably: social, aesthetical, and so on). Or, again: “if you don’t like rules, just use yours”. Once connected with the perfumes’ *valuable object*, the *model-receiver of enunciation* (better and more prosaically, here: the *target*), can *modalize* itself successfully on the side of *power*, entering a kind of connotation that has, indeed, *mythical* status. It is, also, intimately *ludic* and *aesthetic*, at least from a conceptual point of view which may well have been more

unintentionally recalled to the analyst than it was lucidly supposed. I think considering the ludic implications of this narration is inevitable if one considers some elements that are played by the narratological subject of *enunciation* and that unequivocally recalls the dimension of game. The first is one the lexeme “rules”. The second one is the playing card’s *simulacrum*, which is thrown away and acts as it cut off the frame, also empowering the sneaky, vaguely insolent glance of superior air of the model. Now, it is clear that the glance into the camera has the initial effect of triggering us in the *embrayage*, keeping us on the page and almost “talking to us” through the headline “your fragrance, your rules”. It’s a simple, classic, functionally attentive technique. However, it is evident a second, double *débrayage*, producing the simulacrum of the now-finalized Hugo Boss investiture, too. Thus, it doesn’t end with the male model claiming his fragrance and his rules: once like the male model, we ourselves will be able to say “my fragrance, my rules”. We have, then, a *débrayée*, *out-triggered* frame which represents and simulates the fulfilled junction between us/him and the *magical object* which, once gained, is going to fulfil and *modalize* us on the *power-plus-will* narratological profile of one who can “play by his own rules”. As from the perspective on visual language, the use of correspondences is clear on the topological, eidetic, chromatic levels. Firstly, the game of dark and clear hues, the alternate swerve between whites and blacks as opposing one another in their expansion to the corners. Next is the chiasm at work in the distribution of colours for the model and for the bottle, whose darker border is nevertheless similar to the left arm of the boy. Further, the effect of significance on the overall is transmitted by the headline, which unifies the narrations in a framed totality. Finally, the recurrence of green show relevancy both in the way it unifies the background, the eyes and the sweater of the male model, green being a relatively unsaturated colour which doesn’t strike the eye, and, above all, as opposed to the strategically focussed red, which recalls, correlates and makes explicit the representation of transgression in a functional, chromatic stereotype. The plastic language works out inasmuch the lexeme “rules” and other hints disambiguate it. Red is the ribbon in the hand which has just got rid of the card. Red is the card itself which, blurred, is the only explicitly dynamic element of the composition. Red is finally the logo, the label on the Hugo Boss bottle. It is clear that these dynamic features are devices which stereotypically *modalize on power*. They evoke the power to transgress, the kind of zero-grade, deeply *pragmatic* power necessary to any re-definition of the available moves of any game. The core of significance lies thus in evidence, as the ad evokes the power to transgress the rules of the social and aesthetic game, recalling the recourse to active choice in regard to the rules of games. Rules aren’t just to be negotiated, nor silently accepted when they deny us: they are, instead, even to be overturned, “thrown

away” (sic) like a card. The card propelled through the frame, expelled from the boy’s range of chosen rules, acts as the simulacrum for a switch from the condition in which one *wants to be modalized on power* (before buying Hugo Boss) to that of *being empowered to exercise one’s will* (after gaining the Boss essence). Autonomy, identity, active role in the negotiations, transgression of the statuses are triggered by the *valuable object*, since in this narration the *model-receiver of enunciation* couldn’t be able to *modalize* itself without a mediation such as this one.

2. Personal simulacra in industrial packages



In the second ad, “Boss: bottled”, the male model’s simulacrum “oozes” from the bottle even more explicitly. This time around the message in the ad sounds like: “any time you use Boss, you let your

true essence free, the fascinating and resolute essence which lies at your core and that you are watching now". Here, as in the first ad, the plastic complex of the ad announces and narrates this message, and is perfectly made unambiguous by the text, too. "Bottled", here, is not only the perfume, but also the refined yet firm masculinity of the model. The key *enunciational* process, the game of *embrayage* and *débrayage* which acts as a device for *significance* for the ad, works identically in respect to the previous ad. The model looks" into the eyes, triggering the receiver of the enunciative process inside its own frame via the *embrayage* performed with the glance into camera, which focuses into infinity and catches the spectator. Once again, the effect is to depict a simulacrum of the Boss buyer as he would appear once invested with the essence, in the very moment the bottle is opened. The model is "bottled" just like the musky essence that one, keeping glued to the chromatic stereotype, can easily postulate to be as resolute and musky in relation to the dark green and the male target ("fragrance for men"). The inner attitude of the Boss buyer is ready to break free and to incarnate as a *modal property* in the receiver. As a consequence, it is as if the model identified with the perfume, and not only as if the perfume was invested by the property of the model. It's like: "uncork Boss, let free the Boss-man inside you". The representation technique, however, slightly differs from that of the previous ad in respect to the representation of the top of the bottle, as the visual producing work entirely omits this. It focuses, instead, on the use of shades and blurs for the model and the bottle's content, inside of which the eidetic and chromatic plane meet and lighten slightly on the inside, going from left to right. In the lightest spot, the pay-off and the headline are in evidence. The logo-type, instead, is hyper-referential and apparently recursive in the bottle on which the zoom is active. As for the vertical view, it is important to notice the line of buttons interposing between the textual parts and proceeding, along with with the collar, towards the face of the model: this is the only part of the model which appears sharp, and also the one which visually shines emerging from the complex. It is showed, then, as if the bottle actually "contained" the model, which is to be compared to the Boss essence. The effect is re-enforced from the company tag in relief and from it blurring away on his face only. The double effect of maintenance or possible emanation of the model, who triggers the process seductively through the glance in the eyes, is based in this case on a certain ambiguity on the plastic and figurative level: the working principle is that of seduction, a *show/don't show* process opposed to a project of total visibility, thus of clearly erotic nature. The liberation of an inner essence emanating from the inside may or may not happen: this is highly dependant on whether or not we choose to uncork Hugo Boss. Its enunciational project describes this through the overlap between the model and the bottle, and through the inclusion of the first into the latter; through the global blur effect

along with the headline and title of Hugo Boss; through the eidetic rhymes between the large bottom side of the bottle and the model's waist on the bottom border, and, on the upper one, between his shoulders and the curve of the top of the bottle, which is, however, "decapitated". The head of the model is incidentally the only bright part to emerge from the game of blurs, emanating and breaking out while keeping chromatically on focus, in all cases maintaining its chromatic continuity with the ensemble thorough the green eyes. The *connotation* here is mythical, plus it exploits one hyper-referential view of the bottle. "Use Boss and be like him, any time you open the bottle". The ad shows the commercial sample of the bottle *in chiasmo*, associated, compared, correlated, identified, *en pendant* with the model. Here, the Boss man is literally bottled, like the model emanating from the perfume's container.

Games that *play* you

The joint analysis of the enunciations in the two ads shows a mythical/utopian production of significance for both. "In order to be like the models, this perfume helps". "Blokes like these use perfume like Hugo". And off goes a successful script. The most interesting considerations, however, deal with the kind of *valorisation* investing the ad with the thrown-away playing card, the most "ludic" one. It is hard not to recognize, in the heart of the suggested theme, the question of rules to be broken, the borderline between *competence* and *performance*. Should we be avoid resisting the fascinating model's glance as a ticket to individualism, maybe even without buying the perfume? The playing card that flies away is not just about being individuals, it seems to evoke the transformation of rules, the denial of a given system or, to a few – *a la Saussure* – the moment our *parole* steers the *langue* in a direction of ours, even if only ephemerally. The textual coherence of the ad is ensured. One, though, still feels like resisting it, asking for a reference to the state of the world which is self-evidently on the very opposite side of its business plans. That model, in fact, with his resolute glance stained by a tip of fun; with his half shown/half hidden tattoo; with his wrist ribbon looking like rolled up tights (suggesting anything from the erotic game to the use in a goth-freak fashion, promptly incorporated in the "*trendish*" crossover); with his reddened lips denouncing a not-so-outrageous male make up; with that card, flying away as the symbol of a revolution: he and all of these things are not showing us a mere semantic simulacrum. All these elements are offering us a blank fetish, an artificial dummy. Transgression, here, is an enunciation more stereotypical than the enunciational stereotype it is born from. It's hard not to recall some lines in which Umberto Eco annotates Johan Huizinga's 'Homo Ludens' about the terrible

distinction – invisible to a few – between the game *we play* and the game that *plays us*. One, more in the ad's successfully *pragmatized* actor receiving the enunciation than in the ad itself, can't actually see a moment of superficially evoked Paidia, the free, a-codified playing space of game philosopher Roger Caillois, nor one can assist to a moment of Ilynx, the vertigo opening the abyss of our own imagination. Rather, of the social game, Hugo Boss products the embarrassing emergence of a greyish moment of Agon, an imitative and hyper-codified competition of one pawn out of millions, and the fatal self-persuasion of the aesthetical uniqueness of his own, entirely scripted micro-narration. These are not "one's rules": they are, more tragically, "everyone's rules". For such categories, we are inclined to give little credit to an enunciation that doesn't waste time to drive itself past the visual, superficial metaphor. Probably, this kind of analysis itself doesn't lie outside of the recourse to an excess of what Eco calls "inferential walks". My personal considerations are probably quite ludic themselves, but at least they revolve around the semiotic texts chosen for the analysis in a trip ending with the discovery of socio-semiotic worlds of fictional, mythical valorisation, provided with borders which are ferociously guarded and inside of which, nonetheless, pawns are taught into thinking of themselves as absolutely free-willing and unpredictable. Speculations and textual abuses aside, the text as it is works perfectly. At least, so it does for a target deprived of *enunciational* antibodies, made up of undistinguishable gears granted with nominal freedom, ready to slaughter each other for a free slot in the mad run of *collective individualism*: a public to which Hugo Boss speaks lightly and shrewdly with – I suppose – much a better success than this analysis would. And, nonetheless, inspiring these considerations, as well. The personal thoughts I just exposed come, in part, from practise in semiotics I made on one of the two ads. One exercitation of mine was published for a short time on my personal website on the Internet. The short work presented large doses of humour in regards to the Hugo Boss enunciation: however, I can record one review from a famous internet content provider from Italy, which presents it as a "very interesting article" for the principles of business communication (sic). Therefore, I am ending my speculations with a question, maybe a candid one: since semiotics can be, and actually was and is for the critical analysis of texts, too, is it still possible to use its tools on *mises en axiologie* similar to the ones analyzed not just for the contemporary imperative to understand, foresee and industrially implement, but once again for a certain critical vocation today relatively out of fashion, one of humanistic nature? Are the approaches self-excluding?

Further Readings

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